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Editor's Notes

A seasonal wonder

This week the kites are fluttering, dipping, then zooming ever higher, flaunting their gaudy streamers as they soar above the grey gulls which fly so purposefully, back and forth, up and down, over the edgewater at Daytona Beach. Wet sand smacks at the bare feet of children, their fond parents, and collegians, all running along the beach and maneuvering their kites to take advantage of every gust and whip of sea wind. The blue southern sky is streaked with the colors of kites, but kites are flying under northern skies too, where the blue is more tenuous or misty, or perhaps just a windy grey. This week, wherever it is Spring, kites are flying.

What rush of relief from the enclosures of winter; what a heart-lifting ritual of flight and reaching up. Inseparable from the body, the hand is gravity locked to the earth but the string with the kite at the end of it pulls that hand upward toward the sky, perhaps even hinting at the tug of heaven.

Flight is freedom, or at least the illusion of it. Icarus, that unfortunate dreamer, had replicas of wings fastened to his back with wax and then flew toward the sun, but the heat from the sun melted the wax so that the wings slid away and left Icarus to fall drowning into the sea. A tragic story, but one tinged with romantic sadness because everyone knows that urge to be up and away from the mundane. Kites become our surrogates. If they tangle in a treetop or plummet down between buoyant puffs of wind, the loss is only one of pride and petty cash.

Of course the dreamer populations always has a few members who hitch practicality to the fluttering tails of their kites. Benjamin Franklin was one of those, and so were Dr. Alexander Wilson and Thomas

Melville, two Scottish scientists who, in 1749, attached a thermometer to their kites and thus recorded temperatures high above the earth. Others of inventive turn of mind have dedicated themselves to the improvement of kite structures.

England's Captain Baden-Powell managed to hoist himself in the air by a tandem of five kites and, unlike poor Icarus, returned to earth all in one piece. When one considers the financial ill-wind that is buffeting the airlines of American, a tandem of kites seems almost practical.

The young-at-heart sometimes take kite flying very seriously, and along the way demonstrate that children of any age can be the most creative thinkers. Meteorological observations are carried on continuously by the U.S. Weather Bureau kites, even though satellites have enjoyed latter-day fame as weather observers. At Viborg in the northern part of Denmark a permanent station for kite flying includes a thirty-foot high tower that can be rotated on rails, with one side left open. The wind may blow from north, south, east, or west but the opening can be turned leeward so that the operator can sit snugly inside with the windlasses and watch the kites careening out and up.

Kites have been used to throw lines across chasms or carry life lines to distressed ships, all before the days of helicopters. For the intrepid, hang gliding improves greatly on the venture of Icarus. Like colorful batmen, hang gliders float as part of giant kite along the air currents. Consider how many trial kites crashed to earth before hang gliding became feasible (if not completely reassuring) for humans, or for that matter, how many thousands of kites tested the wind while the observers

learned about aeronautics.

Even the staid accounting profession flies a figurative kite now and then when the Financial Accounting Standards Board floats a new Discussion Memorandum over its constituency. Discussion Memos do not all fly high, or even in a straight line, but their launching leads to instruction. Like kite flyers on a breezy Spring day, accountants keep trying for the right interpretation of which way the wind is blowing and the successful navigation of troublesome cross-currents.

Most happily, the sight of kites can make children of us all. A kite flyer running across the beach, or meadow, or playground is the very symbol of a free spirit. And as befits this happy aura, kites are treated as art forms, especially by the Japanese who have crafted high-flying dragons and birds and butterflies.

Kites are a seasonal wonder, with a reminder that every season, any season, is the right time to try to fly something just for the fun of it. There is no guarantee that the results will be as electrifying as Ben Franklin's, but then, with a lucky turn of the wind something new and wonderful just might come of it.

